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ABSTRACT

It is well documented that women experience more stress than do men prior to the decision to divorce, but that women experience less stress, and better adjustment in general, than do men after divorce. Three possible reasons for why women fare better than men have been suggested. First, women are more attuned to relationships, and relational difficulties, than are men. Women are likely to notice marital problems which cause stress and to feel relief when such problems end. Second, women are more likely to rely on social support systems and help from others than are men. This may help to cushion the woman's emotional stress after divorce. Finally, women have much to gain in terms of self-esteem when they divorce and add new roles to their lives. Self-esteem may serve as a safeguard against anxiety and the effects of stressors. Although gender differences in reactions to divorce have been well established, future research might examine individual differences within groups. More research is needed to investigate the relation between self-esteem and divorce. The exact relation between self-esteem and initiation of, or involvement in, divorce is not yet known. (Author/NB)

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Gender Differences in Reaction to Divorce

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Running Head: Gender Differences

Abstract

Women's reaction and subsequent adjustment to divorce has been demonstrated as being more positive than men's. Several explanations were offered for this gender difference. Gender differences in previous marital happiness, social relationships and help-seeking behavior, and in self-esteem, were offered as possible reasons for women's superior adjustment.

Gender Differences in Reaction to Divorce

Individual differences in reaction to divorce vary from devastation to relief (Thomas, 1982). As Thomas (p. 19) suggested, "the event of divorce in an individual's life can be a painful rejection, a stimulus to suicidal rumination, an exit to greener pastures, or a release from a stormy, traumatic relationship which inhibited personal growth " Evidence exists that females are more likely to experience relief and personal growth as a result of divorce, and to fare better than men in terms of adjustment to divorce, whereas males are more likely to experience pain and devestation (Asher & Bloom, 1983; Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983; Bloom & Caldwell, 1982; Chiriboga, 1982; Zeiss, Zeiss, & Johnson, 1980). The purpose of this paper is to investigate reasons for such gender variance.

It is well known that women have to face more stressors due to divorce than do men because of differences in income, social activity and single parenthood (Albrecht, 1980; Baruch et al., 1983). Yet despite these stressors, women fare better in terms of reporting less stress, and experiencing greater

growth, as a result of divorce. In fact, some stressors are actually blessings in disguise. For example, being a single parent can be stressful, but children may provide a social support system for women. And although women have less income than men after divorce, women report more satisfaction with their financial situation (Keith, 1985). Finally, it appears women are more likely to rely on relationships to gain self-esteem, and this might lead one to assume that women would therefore have a more stressful situation after divorce. Yet as Baruch et al. demonstrated, women typically gain in self esteem, primarily due to new efficacious roles necessitated by loss of a husband.

It is argued that three possible reasons emerge as to why women fare better than men in reacting and adjusting to divorce. First, women are more atuned to relationships, and relational difficulties, than are males (Bardwick, 1971). For this reason, women are more likely to notice marital problems, which causes stress, and to be relieved when such problems are ended due to separation or divorce (Baruch et al., 1983). Second, women are more likely to rely on social support systems and help from others, and this may

cushion their emotional stress after divorce (Chiriboga, Coho, Stein, & Roberts, 1979; Keith, 1986). Finally, women have much to gain in terms of self-esteem as they add new roles to their lives whereas males have little to gain. For example, males add stereotypically feminine roles, such as toilet cleaning, to their lives after divorce. Such roles are devalued by society and therefore do not contribute to self-esteem (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983).

Review of Literature

It is well documented that females experience more stress than do males prior to the decision to divorce, but that females experience less stress, and better adjustment in general, than do males after the actual separation and after divorce (Asher & Bloom, 1983; Bloom & Caldwell, 1981; Chiriboga, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Zeiss, Zeiss, & Johnson, 1980). Womens' better adjustment, in terms of improvement of life and self-esteem, has been found to continue as long as ten years after divorce (Wallerstein, 1986).

Divorce as a Relief

Women are more atuned both to relationships and relationship difficulties, and are more apt to derive self-esteem from relationships, than are men

(Bardwick, 1971). Women recollect the time prior to divorce as being more stressful than do men (Bloom & Caldwell, 1981). Albrecht (1980) found that 22% of the men, versus 8% of the women, actually recalled that period in their lives as optimum in comparison with their current divorced state. Further, more females than males reported the postdivorce period as most stressful.

Apparently the greater stress reported by women as occuring prior to separation and divorce is related to the stresses of a conflicted marriage. Women report more disappointment and dissatisfaction with their past marriage than do men after divorce (Kitson & Sussman, 1981). As noted by Baruch et al. (1983, p. 167), "freed from the tension of marriage, the divorced woman often finds she is beginning to feel better about herself than she has in years." These authors concluded that divorced women spent so much energy trying to save an unhappy marriage that the actual separation represented a point of relief and an opportunity for growth. It is possible that feelings of reflief allow for the possibilities of growth.

Perhaps because women experience more stress in a conflicted marriage than do men, women are more likely to initiate divorce (Zeiss et al., 1980). Initiation of divorce is predictive of better divorce adjustment (Kurdek & Blisk, 1983; Wallerstein, 1986). The individual who initiates divorce may begin an emotional withdrawal earlier than the one who does not, and may also begin to make plans for the future, and these experiences may relate to relief, rather than devastation, at the time of divorce. Put simply, the initiator has much to gain, whereas the person who is left is forced to reorganize life in ways not actually wanted.

Social and Emotional Support

Degree of social activity also correlates with adjustment (Spanier & Castro, 1979). Social support likely aids in adjustment by providing therapeutic comfort. Women are more likely to report great satisfaction in their friendships after divorce than are men according to Keith (1986). That investigator found that divorced men were more isolated socially than divorced women.

Typically, women are awarded child custody (Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974). On the other hand,

men have little contact with their children after two years after the divorce (Furstenberg, 1982). Children may serve as social support systems for women. Wallerstein (1986) found that some divorced men had merely "phantom" relationships with their children, and some appeared not to be able to remember the names of their children.

It appears that both sexes continue life-styles congruent with stereotypic masculine or feminine roles, with females, but not males, continuing caregiving for children, and with females, but not males, seeking help and friendship from others. For females, the result is a social network that aids in what is probably both psychological and material ways. For males, the result may be an isolation that is psychologically harmful.

But in divorce, both sexes must also adopt roles stereotypical of the opposite sex. Men must learn to cook and clean, women to care for their families economically. The result is that females add a role that contributes to self-esteem, but that males do not.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem has been shown to correlate with distress felt after divorce in a negative fashion (Kitson & Sussman, 1982). Thomas (1982) concluded that self-esteem is shaken by the trauma of divorce, and esteem, and self-efficacy (as a dimension of self-esteem), are essential for divorce adjustment. Although divorce may shake self-esteem, accomplishments met because of divorce appear to build esteem and self-efficacy (Baruch et al., 1983). However, it appears that men have little to gain in terms of new accomplishments, but that women, in gaining new jobs and financial independence, and in heading a family, have much to gain that leads to growth in self-esteem.

Divorce may be seen as requiring adjustment to a new life-style (Spanier & Castro, 1979). Women often have much to gain in adopting stereotypically male roles, for this appears to bring an increase in self-efficacy and self-esteem (Baruch et al., 1983). Women may learn to manage certain household affairs typically reserved for men. They obtain jobs, and despite their lower pay than men, report greater satisfaction than do men in terms of financial status

(Keith, 1985). As Wallerstein (1986) pointed out, women improve the quality of their lives more than do men as measured ten years after divorce. Improvement as a gain, likely leads to greater self-esteem, whereas lack of improvement merely maintains, or perhaps, due to lack of meeting expectations, lowers esteem.

Self-esteem is a stable trait and high self-esteem has been shown to correlate with lack of anxiety and is believed as a safeguard for the individual against anxiety (Burns, 1979). Gender differences in self-esteem have been found to exist long before divorce. Specifically, men who divorced were found to have low self-esteem as compared with men who did not divorce (Erbes & Hedderson, 1984) Further, women who had high self-esteem years prior to divorce (and often prior to marriage) were more apt to divorce later in life (Klemer, 1971). Klemer's measure of self-esteem, however, was oriented towards self-efficacy. Thus, along with having much to gain in accomplishments that can lead to higher self-esteem, women who divorce may happen to have high esteem (or at least high self-efficacy) prior to

marriage. It is even possible that women who have higher self-efficacy are more prone to divorce as a result of their tendency to expect more and better possibilities for future achievement. Females who hold a low sense of self-efficacy may see limited opportunities for the future and expect that they cannot support themselves, and a family.

Conclusions

It is proposed that women fare better than men after divorce in terms of stress reactions, and in overall adjustment, due to at least three conditions. First, divorce is more likely a release from an unhappy marriage for women than for men, and this feeling of relief may be associated with the ability to forge a new life-style.

Second, after divorce women are more likely to have a social support system. As therapists have long argued, relief from distress and growth is associated with having someone who cares about you listen to you (e.g., Rogers, 1951).

Thirdly, women have a greater chance of gaining self-esteem because of divorce than do men due to the new roles women gain in supporting themselves and their children.

Self-esteem may serve as a safeguard against anxiety and the results of stressors. Greater self-esteem also allows the individual to have greater expectations for success, and thereby to risk new accomplishments. However, gender differences in self-esteem may also exist prior to divorce, with males suffering from low esteem and females having high esteem, particularly in terms of self-efficacy. Those females high in esteem may be more apt to initiate divorce and to see possibilities of growth due to divorce, as well as to end pain and conflict.

Although gender differences in reactions to divorce have been well established, future research might be directed towards individual differences within groups. In particular, more research is needed to investigate the relation between self-esteem and divorce. Although some evidence exists that women high in self-efficacy, and men low in self-esteem, are more likely to divorce, such evidence is scant, and the exact relation between self esteem and initiation of or involvment in divorce is unknown.

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